

CONRAD KAIN*By* EARLE BIRNEY

I

Conrad Kain⁽¹⁾ was a mountain man.
 He hardened his hips on the Raxalpe herding goats as a boy
 And hooped his heart for endurance in high Austrian stonequarries.
 The casual Herren gave Kronen to be hauled up his mountains
 But not enough for the miner's widow, his mother, or meagrefaced brothers.
 For them he poached, and plodded the wintered plains for work,
 Finding little of that, and firewarmth less, except with the poor.
 Conrad heard of a land where a man might labor all year,
 And save to be tourist himself in Bergen as towering as Europe's,
 A tourist for more than a feastday, perhaps for a princely fortnight,
 In Alpen empty of landlords and alive with fabulous game,
 In ranges unowned and billowing over a thousand Austrias.
 Conrad crossed in the steerage, and stared at the world of Canada.

II

Saskatchewan taught him how frostbite scalds on the lonely trapline,
 And the driven days of a farmhand under the eaves of turf and dung,
 Marooned on a buoy unhailed in a hoar Atlantic of prairie,
 There was the farmer's fattening daughter, a quarter-section for dowry,
 But also flatness, and men who work without mirth or music.
 He remembered sunset on fells, and the slant and slew of their forests.
 Conrad Kain was a mountain man, and he moseyed off to the Rockies.

III

In Banff there was much that even a Bauer from Nasswald might learn;
 From an Indian ten-year-old how a paddle should twist in the palm;
 From packers the devious diamond-hitch and roping pintos like Herren,
 Bearsteak and sourdough and tepees, and loping lightly on snowshoes.
 For the immigrant workman such lore was a lever to lift up freedom;
 Fumbling with transit and levels in forty degrees below zero
 Was a debt to a fairy godmotherland to be pencilled down in a diary.

IV

Even the mountains had western ways and harsh whims to be humored.
 The Devil's Club has thorns and the wolverine is a trapthief;
 More stabbing than cold in the night is the June mosquito, and soundest
 The sleep above timberline; soft flakes may fall and fall in the Selkirks
 Till the lone trapper is meshed and no man comes to his cabin.

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But Kain was a fellow for living and when his flour was finished
 He burrowed in drifts for the frozen flesh of marten skinned before snowfall,
 Made himself soup and stood on his feet and snowshoed out.

V

Becoming Canuck was more than learning, was carrying lore to others,
 Bringing the skill of the ski to the worshipful younglings of Banff,
 Packing an older wisdom into the peaks with his iceaxe,
 Tales the pile-dwellers knew, primate and sly as their wit,
 Tales till the billy boiled under the rainrapped boughs,
 Or under the stars by Mystic Lake while he puffed old tea in his Meerschaum,
 Easing the memory roving to regions where somehow the robins were wiser
 And the rocks were seamed with the sagas of men back through a thousand
 centuries.

VI

Conrad Kain was a simple man and nothing much to stare at.
 He never ran for election nor retired on the labor of others.
 He never went to a college to collect the thoughts he should think.
 Some say he never grew up quite, some think he was psychopathic,
 The way he sidled from strangers and cities, and mooned about mountains;
 Yet he learned to win the men of the West and to master their peaks
 By his animal patience and grace and the craft of his ancestors.

VII

He was first to look from Mt. Louis, that bomb-burst of stone by Forty-Mile
 Creek,
 The trunks of the Purcells, towering unclimbed from their Pliocene roots,
 He passaged, naming for others, and many a spire unknown
 Once, when he cornered a goat on a cornice, an acre of snow cracked off,
 Bore him fighting over a cliff and buried him fathoms;
 He dug himself free, and the goat, and dubbed his own gashes with spruce
 gum.
 At the lead of a file on Balfour a whip of lightning flicked them,
 Straightening their hair and strumming their axes like cellos;
 From their hands he struck the steel and raced them safe to a cave.
 Once after storms had pinned his party to tents in the trees,
 The wind waned in the night and the peaks shone by the new-washed stars;
 Conrad crept from his sleepingbag and steered alone for the mightiest,
 Threaded his way through crevasses by thunderbolts flashed from the
 cloud-rack,
 Felt with his axe the edges of falls till he planted his feet on the summit.
 Returning he leapt the last snowbridge breaking beneath him, limped at dawn
 Into camp, with a yodel, glad to be whole and gripping the turf in the valley

VIII

Conrad's name grew tall with the Rockies. There were tales in the East
 Of a bashful guide who had roped a bear from his den on the Athabaska,

Who smoked his tea and chewed his tobacco and talked of birds like a poet,
 And of rocks like a patient professor. They paid his way back to Europe,
 Sent the quarryman back as a hunter for science into the Urals.

IX

He was drawn to the Alps and his mother's tomb, and he tuned his ear
 Once more to cuckoos and the clinking of goatbells over the cosy valleys.
 But lonelier vistas fanned in his heart, where feats are more fateful than
 airing.

In Nasswald the best of guides was a batman still to landlords.
 Conrad packed his Chamonix hat and shipped for the shining cones of
 New Zealand.

He conquered Cook and lived to cull, from the grist of a slide, the bodies
 Of men who had talked a safer route; then he mocked the mountain's fame
 By a grand traverse of its peaks with one wiry determined female of sixty.

X

Yet the redribbed valleys and rushing rivers of Yoho ran in his veins,
 The sudden splash of marigolds over the soft new grass
 By banks of snow in the green March forests of Spillimacheen,—
 The bell of a cayuse falling and fading through candlestick firs
 Under the blue-hung glacier cirques. And always there grew in his heart
 The hugeness of Yu-hai-has-kun, highest of all the giants of Canada,
 The monster unconquered and murderous, icerobed and stormcrowned
 Robson.

XI

Twice he had failed; more than twice he had climbed the neighbouring forts
 To reconnoitre anew. This upturned realm of rock and neve
 Kept its own weather, had sudden frosts and winds, and thaws as sudden,
 To con for his diary, along with the tracks and times of recurrent cascades,
 Of icefall and avalanche. Trained like a Baldhead to read through airy miles
 The angle and span of a ledge, the strength of a snowbridge, he spun his
 campaign,

Waited his weather and comrades,—then challenged Mt. Robson.

XII

He struck straight up the hanging glacier, high up a hundred Niagaras,
 Hewed steps in the frozen torrents almost as fast as the boots of McCarthy
 And Foster could follow, the spun snow and the iceflakes freezing on lashes.
 He looked at the poker face of the peak, read in its cloudmask
 A frost that might root for an hour the lethal rocks, read his own cards,—
 His companions' quickness and courage—then raced up the chute of an
 avalanche.

They climbed like cats with ears tensed and voice mute lest a call
 Unseal tumultuous death. Then over an uprobed snowdeep
 And under icebridges dun and splintered, outflanking the glacier's forehead,
 Into the final cloistered bergschrund swiftly they cut,

Roping on glazing rockwall, and out into wind arrowed with ice.
 Then up the endless sharpening shoulder, till a couloir terraced
 By snowbutts baulked them, a fortress garnish with sixty-foot feathers of
 rime.

Chipping finger and toe-hold by turn they tugged ever upward,
 Balanced in glimmering emptiness, betting for life with a bootnail,
 A bend of a thumb, and a rope frozen rigid and colder than cable,
 Till over an overhang glaring with icicled teeth they fought to the top.

XIII

There was time but for Bergheil and handshake, a glance through a gash in
 the cloud-rug

At the trespassed terrors below, a Tiefblick of dwarfed Mt. Resplendent,
 And cobalt lakes that browned at the toy fringes of islands.

Then to face the descent, already the sun far sloping,
 And cold seizing their limbs. While his snowblind comrades clung

To the slick rope, Conrad sought for a safer way back,
 Drew them over traverses devious and daring, down

Four thousand icy feet to the first safe ledge.

There with jokes he spurred them from coma all through the frigid wind
 and the night.

And at dawn he led them foot-torn and faint over the last glittering glacier,
 The last of the rotted rocks, back to the blessed lake,

To the firm flattening trail, and sleep, and to fame enduring

In all who remember mountains, back from the first manning of Robson,
 Of a premier peak of the globe, a pinnacle worthy its conqueror.

XIV

Maybe his victories were virtueless, empty as Polar voyagings,
 No more real than the peerings of Herschel, or the wreaths of the runners in
 Pindar.

His muscles were clamped in the follies of boys and his mind was incurably
 curious;

So he climbed as another would read and because he was reared to the game.

He is dead and his conquests faded, for he failed to carve them from flesh;

He seized his land for no sovereign, and left it uncivilized still.

He was reckless only in rescuing comrades, and this was his proudest record:

That on stormiest edge or through deepest abyss he led no man to his hurt.

A glory perverse? And whose is not, in the far vision of Time?

The glow of our rocks is richer by the life of an Austrian goatherd,
 Of Conrad Kain the Mountain man, of Conrad Kain the Canadian.⁽²⁾

⁽²⁾ *For the facts of Kain's life I am indebted to his autobiography, Where The Clouds Can Go, edited by J. Monroe Thorington and published by The American Alpine Club, New York, 1935—E.B.*
